

## The Failure of Vietnamization

Nearly two years after President Nixon took office, the American public is still being told that the Administration has a strategy, called "Vietnamization," for ending the Indochina conflict on honorable terms and bringing all U.S. forces home. The President points often to the sharply decreased U.S. casualty toll, to the fact that U.S. troops are leaving the combat zone, and to his commitment to bring the force level down to 284,000 by the spring of 1971. The Administration has succeeded in convincing a large sector of public opinion that by the time of the 1972 Presidential elections, the United States will be playing only a supplemental, advisory role in the Indochina fighting.

Frequently lost sight of is a series of other, very disturbing, events and statements in the last eight months that together provide a totally different picture of U.S. policy and intentions in Indochina. The importance of these developments is, first, that they indicate a redirection of U.S. military involvement, not a reduction or termination, and, second, that they so qualify the concept of Vietnamization as to make it either an unworkable strategy or the pretext for extensive escalation.

During these eight months, the United States has: sent U.S. troops into Cambodia and, upon their departure, provided tactical air support well beyond the sanctuary areas for South Vietnamese and Cambodian troops; established a major military assistance program (\$255 million) for Cambodia and all but officially declared that the United States is committed to assuring the survival of a non-Communist regime there (recall Vice-President Agnew's statement of August 23: "We're going to do everything we can to help the Lon Nol Government"); intensified U.S. air operations in northern as well as southern Laos; re-started the bombing



of Communist SAM sites, air defense facilities, supply lines, and supply depots in North Vietnam and Laos, justifying it by citing questionable "assurances" from Hanoi about U.S. reconnaissance flights over the North; and conducted a ground foray into North Vietnam that has put Hanoi on notice about the possibility of future ground actions north of the Demilitarized Zone.

Prior to these actions, the President had said that the continuation of Vietnamization and U.S. troop withdrawals would be determined by progress in the Paris talks, improvements in the ARVN, and no major offensive action by Communist forces in South Vietnam. In recent months, however, new conditions have been added by the Administration. During and after the Cambodia decision, the President declared that Vietnamization further required that the sanctuaries be kept cleared of Communist forces. On his Southeast Asia tour, the Vice-President related the security of fall of Cambodia to Vietnamization, saying it would be "impossible for the Vietnamization program and the disengagement of American troops to take place if Cambodia falls."

Following the recent U.S. air action over North Vietnam, the President, at his December 10 news conference, indicated that Vietnamization could not proceed while Communist troops are massing and being resupplied outside South Vietnam for possible offensive action. The next day, Defense Secretary Laird added another condition, saying that Vietnamization and further troops withdrawals now depend also on progress in securing the release of American prisoners of war.

Vietnamization has become conditioned on so many circumstances that unless the North Vietnamese decide virtually to cease their activity and radically alter their policies -- stop building up their forces, stop firing at U.S. aircraft, stop killing ARVN soldiers, stop refusing to release POWs -- the whole program becomes meaningless. It is then not a strategy for disengagement but a device for prolonging the U.S. presence until our optimum conditions are satisfied, for expanding U.S. military operations in Indochina (including North Vietnam), and for rationalizing escalation to the American public. Every U.S.-initiated action in the war can now be explained as a "protective reaction" to the opponent's provocations and attempts to undermine Vietnamization.

U.S. escalation and the verbal contortions to justify it demonstrate that Vietnamization has already failed. Primarily, this is because nearly all of Indochina is the battleground for Communist forces, an area in which they can operate at varying strengths and intensities, and with the certainty of Soviet and Chinese assistance to make up for material losses. Vietnamization, instead of seizing the initiative from the opponent, has succeeded only at broadening U.S. military and political involvement without showing any sign of being able to attrit, interdict, or demoralize the Communist forces. The ARVN, which is supposed to replace withdrawing U.S. forces, has been sustaining about 300 (reported) casualties weekly for some time. Desertions continue to run high among ARVN units. Intensified bombing, air support missions, and



Cambodia-style incursions cannot now, any more than before, reverse the unfavorable balance of forces in Indochina.

Vietnamization has also failed because the accompanying negotiating strategy for compelling Hanoi to bargain "seriously" (i.e., on U.S. terms) in Paris has floundered. Faced with the prospect of a stronger ARVN and GVN as U.S. troops were withdrawing, Hanoi's leaders were expected to prefer dealing with the Americans to dealing with Saigon. But so long as the United States, in Hanoi's view, is committed to turning the war completely over to the ARVN at a pace believed likely to ensure a GVN victory, it cannot and will not knuckle under to U.S. pressure. To the North Vietnamese, offers such as the President's of October 7 for a cease-fire amount to asking them to surrender their initiative in Indochina, give Saigon time to stabilize and the ARVN time to catch its breath, grant Nixon a political victory at home, and accept the participation of Thieu and Ky in any political arrangements that might subsequently be worked out.

The North Vietnamese, in short, will continue to challenge Vietnamization, on the battlefield and in Paris, rather than sit idly by while the United States very gradually reduces its forces to a "residual" presence of from 50,000 to 100,000 men. Although well aware of the President's warnings of retaliation, Hanoi seems prepared to accept the consequences of maintaining pressure on South Vietnam. By building up their logistical system and troop strength in southern Laos, northeast Cambodia, and north of the DMZ, the North Vietnamese are once again in position to launch major offensives, perhaps after the announced U.S. withdrawals



of next spring are completed.

Is there an alternative to readopting, and perhaps expanding, the bombing strategy of 1965, a course that recent Administration behavior suggests is now being followed? Or must Vietnamization and its inevitable byproduct, escalation, continue to be accepted as the only "responsible," "modest," "middle-of-the-road" course available?

There is another way to get out of Vietnam, and that way is, as someone once said, to get out. It entails admitting that the United States has done all it can in support of the GVN, and accepting whatever consequences for South Vietnam may ensue because of our departure. But such an approach can also mean obtaining, in return for our agreement to withdraw totally and rapidly -- within one year or less -- terms from the other side that, under Vietnamization, are highly unlikely to be obtained, now or in the future. Complete U.S. withdrawal could be made contingent upon the return of U.S. prisoners and assurances of no interference with the withdrawals -- conditions that Hanoi has already indicated are acceptable. It may also prove possible to gain Communist agreement to a temporary cease-fire during the withdrawal period, time that would allow the GVN as much as the Vietnamese Communists to prepare either for political accommodation or for renewed civil war.

A genuine withdrawal strategy of the kind just proposed is by no means based on sanguine expectations. The point is, however, that Vietnamization or any other strategy geared to military victory in Vietnam cannot yield better results. Two, three, or several years hence, the only certainties about Vietnamization <sup>are</sup> ~~is~~ that many thousands more will die, U.S. involvement in Indochina will be wider and more destructive, and the prospects for creating an independent, self-reliant society in South Vietnam will not have improved.